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ABSTRACT

Latin elements or themes made for the North American market have been used in American films, but at the same time these films have been playing in a Latin American market, making it useful to examine how Latin America has been portrayed in these films. The taste for exotic locales and themes is an element that has been present since the beginnings of the American musical theater. Specific Latin influences came around the end of the nineteenth century with the advent of several historically important events that served to deepen the United States' ties to its southern neighbors: (1) the War with Mexico (1836) for the independence of Texas; (2) the Spanish-American War of 1898 when Americans fought in Cuba, receiving Puerto Rico as part of the peace treaty; and (3) the digging of the Panama Canal which the United States took over from France in 1907. A host of films have portrayed Latin Americans with familiar stereotypes, such as the hissing villain, the gigolo, the "Mexican Spitfire," and the "lazy, shiftless Latin." Although non-musicals were made, the primary genre of films dealing with Latin American was romantic musicals that used popular Latin music. (Seventeen notes are included.) (MS)

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"The South American Way": Hollywood Looks at Latins and at Latin America

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In an interview which appeared in 1985 in the Chicago Tribune the Panamanian singer/songwriter Rubén Blades, in recounting a little of his childhood to the interviewer, remarked: "I admired the movies -- Fred Astaire films, Bob Hope films -- my grandmother took me every day... There was a time when Latin music was in every American movie. There was a time when it was fashionable to dance the mambo."[1] Blades is correct, and in his statement we have the seeds of a paradox: American films with Latin elements or themes made for the North-American market but also playing in a Latin-American market. How was Latin America portrayed in these films? This paper hopes to shed a little light on the subject.

A particularly fertile period for Latin themes in the movies was the 1940's. During World War II the European market for U. S. films dried up completely, and a concerted effort was made to court new markets for American product. We began to take more notice of our neighbors to the south. Many movies were made with ostensibly Latin themes: Abbot and Costello's One Night in the Tropics (1940), Blondie Goes Latin and Charlie Chan in Rio (1941), and Crosby and Hope's Road to Rio (1948) -- all serial films.

The plot of Road to Rio is a slender one:"Crosby and Hope play a pair of musicians who, after accidentally setting fire to a carnival, sail to Rio. On board ship they meet Dorothy Lamour, a mysterious beauty whose mercurial changes in temperament baffle them -- until they realize that she is being hypnotized by her aunt into marrying a man im Brazil that she does not love."[2] This theme of beautiful South American girl (usually an heiress) forced to marry against her will recurs often. A 1936 musical called

Hi Gaucho had the B-movie actor John Carroll playing a Latin with an excruciatingly phony accent and saving the brunette heroine from a bandit who turns out to be none other than the elderly Don to whom she has been betrothed against her wishes.

A grabbag of titles from thirties and forties musicals shows a heavy Latin American influence: Cuban Love Song (1931), Flying Down to Rio (1933), Under the Pampas Moon (1935), In Caliente (1935), Argentine Nights and Down Argentine Way (1940), That Night in Rio, They Met in Argentina, Weekend in Havana, Fiesta (1941), Brazil, The Gay Señorita and Mexicana (1944), The Thrill of Brazil (1956), Carnival in Costa Rica (1947).

John Storm Roberts, in his book, The Latin Tinge, has this to say about these films:"Latin music's mass popularity was developing from the beginning of the decade (1940). An extremely important part was played by Hollywood, with a large number of musicals built around specifically Latin-oriented plots (often tied to a country or city title), and many others that include a Latin number or two in a non-Latin script."[3]

During this period, Broadway, Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley functioned as a single unit where popular music was concerned, and the taste for exotic locales and themes is an element that was present since the beginnings of the American musical theater. No less a musician than Leonard Bernstein states (not exactly correctly) that the difference between an operetta and a musical comedy is that "operettas are exotic in flavor."[4]

The fact is that operetta was the forerunner of musical comedy, and that European operettas were enjoyed by American audiences before

we began producing our own homegrown variety. Musical comedy is more correctly identified as an American variation of operetta. Operetta commonly deals with royalty and high society and employs light operatic voices and sustained, fairly complicated lyric lines. Musical comedy is concerned with "the proverbial man in the street, his girl, and their way of life... Its vernacular songs were more an extension of recitative than they were lyrical elaborations, and ragtime and jazz were instantly at home in these works."[5]

In actuality, the line between musical comedy and operetta is a fine one. For example, Rodgers and Hammerstein are identified by Gerald Bordman in his book American Operetta as modern examples of the operetta tradition; other critics would consider them the kings of musical comedy.

It was in 1867 that Jaques Offenbach's La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein took New York by storm, despite the fact that it was performed entirely in French. The fizzy songs became popular anyway, and the work is still occasionally revived, most recently at this summer's Ravinia Festival in Chicago.

A German-American contemporary of Offenbach, the now-forgotten Julius Eichberg, wrote the first entirely American operetta in the 1860's. Some of his titles were: The Doctor of Alcantara, The Two Cadis, A Night in Rome, The Rose of Tyrol. We can see that exoticisms were part and parcel of operetta, as Bernstein says, but they were often retained in musical comedy as well.

The specifically Latin influences came a little later than the 1860's, closer to the turn of the century. There were several historically important events during the nineteenth century that

served to deepen the United States' ties to its southern neighbors: 1. the War with Mexico (1836) for the independence of Texas; 2. the Spanish-American War of 1898 when Americans fought in Cuba, receiving Puerto Rico as part of the peace treaty; 3. the digging of the Panama Canal which we took over from France in 1907. All these events helped to push Latin America to the forefront of the news in the U.S.A.

In 1897 Victor Herbert presented an operetta on Broadway called The Idol's Eye. Its setting was faraway India, but one of the songs was called "Cuban Song"-- "the beginning of a Broadway flirtation with Latin themes that was to last for half a century. Most of them were longer on exoticism than on musical authenticity... Tin Pan Alley's and Broadway's way with Latin styles was always eclectic, and usually trivial."[6] And since Hollywood was essentially an extension of Tin Pan Alley and Broadway, we find the same trivialization present in the movies.

Roberts documents the making of short subjects using Latin musicians playing Latin music as early as 1931, shortly after sound films began. A real phenomenon of the time, Argentine tango singer Carlos Gardel, made several full-length musicals as early as 1934, including one called Tango on Broadway. Also in 1931, a well regarded but not particularly popular film called Cuban Love Song (named for a popular song of the day) starred the Metropolitan Opera baritone Lawrence Tibbett as an American marine who, during the Spanish-American War, fathers a child by a beautiful Cuban peanut vendor (a profession chosen so that another popular song of the day could be used), even though he is engaged to a member of

San Francisco society. Change Cuba to Japan and you have Madame Butterfly. Lupe Velez, often billed as the"Mexican Spitfire," played the part of the Cuban girl. American filmmakers tended to see Latin America as a monolith, forgetting that Cuba was different from Mexico, that Chile is not Argentina. As former actor President Ronald Reagan said a few years ago when offering a toast to the President of Brazil in Brasilia: "I'm so happy to be here in Bolivia!" To American moviemakers, a Latin was a Latin, and nationality never entered into it.

Still in 1931, the Mexican singing star, José Mojica, made a film for 20th Century Fox called One Mad Kiss, about which one film historian ad this to say: "One Mad Kiss was one bad musical... all about a Latin Robin Hood who singlehandedly does battle with corrupt government officials in the interest of the oppressed."[7] The seemingly curious ingredient in the musical was that all the principal players were Spanish-speaking, and an entire Spanish language version was made in addition to the English language one. Even the songs were performed both in Spanish and in English.

The reason for this lies with the beginning of the movie industry. The French dominated the world market before World War I, but the 1914-1918 War had given American filmmakers their opportunity. They gained full control of their home market for the first time and replaced the Europeans as principal film suppliers to the nonbelligerent areas of the world, particularly Latin America and Japan."[8] When sound film came in, the American film moguls were as positive as their European counterparts that foreign audiences would not sit still for movies in languages other than their own, so Hollywood

produced a number of movies in English and another language. Besides the obscure musical in Spanish which I already mentioned, the Greta Garbo film Anna Christie was also made in a German version, and so was The Blue Angel, starring Marlene Dietrich and Emil Jannings. "After the winter of 1930-31 the worsening world depression put an end to Hollywood's foreign-language production. It turned out audiences were not so nationalistic as producers had thought... Thereafter, American studios and their European distributors adopted an eclectic approach, dubbing, adding printed subtitles or releasing the original American versions, depending on what each film required or different countries desired."[9] To this day, films in Brazil are presented in the original language with subtitles, although TV movies and American TV shows are dubbed into Portuguese.

Foreign actors and actresses were employed in American films from the very beginning, although the image of a Latin male in silent films was that of a hissing villain. One actor singlehandedly changed that image of the Latin man in motion pictures, and that was Rudolph Valentino. His great success began with the filming of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1921), from the novel by the Argentinian writer, Blasco Ibanez, (and later remade with Glenn Ford in 1961), and culminated in his great triumph in 1921's The Sheik. The distinguished Brazilian film historian, Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes, wrote this about Valentino and his image: "The type of traditional hero, masculine but pure, was abandoned in favor of a type which involved a more pronounced erotic element... In effect, everything indicates that in the Valentino phenomenon

we are dealing with a stylized and erotic fantasy of the gigolo."[10]

Arguably, a gigolo does not seem like much of an improvement over a dastardly villain as the image for the Latin man, and Valentino paved the way for a whole horde of "Latin Lovers/" including Ramon Novarro, Cesar Romero, Fernando Lamas, Ricardo Montalban, and in its latest incarnation, the whispery-voiced singer, Julio Iglesias. One compiler of a film dictionary describes Cesar Romero thusly:"He is a figment of flashing teeth, plastic moustache, and brillantine, the Cisco Kid for several years,the Gay Caballero, and Tall, Dark and Handsome. No lady could trust him, and yet his guile and danger were all in the lazy rhythm of his name."[11]

Female Latins tended to be played by the stunning Dolores Del Rio, the epitome of the classic Latin beauty,or by the aforementioned spitfire,Lupe Velez. Dolores Del Rio was the heroine of Flying Down to Rio, a movie which is memorable today because it marked the first teaming of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The producer of the film, Louis Brock, wanted to make a musical to challenge Busby Berkeley's delirious spectacles, so "he sold RKO studio head Merian C. Cooper on the idea of a musical that would bring together two of Cooper's favorite themes: South America and aviation. (Cooper was on the Board of Directors of Pan American Airways.)"[12] You may recall the famous scene of chorus girls dancing on the wings of a 1930's plane.

The movie benefited greatly from a beautiful score by Vincent Youmans, in which he attempted to meld a Latin rhythm with a Tin Pan Alley idiom. The story was a slender one, centering on a

Latin debutante's inability to decide between her love for an American aviator and her promise to her Brazilian fiance. The fiance was played by an actual Brazilian, the tenor Raul Roulien. He was one in a long line of Latin musicians who appeared in thirties and forties movies, which also includes the aforementioned Carlos Gardel and Jose Mojica, the Mexican singer Tito Guizar, Desi Arnaz, bandleader Xavier Cugat, who always appeared leading his orchestra with his little Chihuahua dog peeping out of his breast pocket instead of a handkerchief, and even the classical pianist Jose Iturbi, such a fixture in MGM musicals. These performers registered a real Latin presence in the movies, even though they were rarely part of the action and were used more as window dressing.

But the most kinetic Latin presence in forties films was female, that fantastic apparition known as Carmen Miranda. Her real name was Maria do Carmo Miranda da Cunha, and she made her movie debut in Down Argentine Way in 1940 after scoring a success on Broadway the year before. She was already a star in Brazil when she began her American career, and she is probably the most beloved star in her own country. There is even a museum in Rio dedicated to her and her outfits. She appeared in many, many musicals, always costumed with tropical ruffles and bare midriffs, massive platform sandals, and a gigantic headdress of exotic fruit. Some Brazilians object to her exaggerated display, but there was a great deal of knowingness in her parody, and she was always clever and dymamic on the screen. Her energy and talent gave the lie to the stereotype to the "lazy, shiftless Latin." The surrealism of Carmen Miranda's film persona subverts any conventional stereotype, in any case.

The film musical has often been described as the most pure cinematic form: "the life-like presentation of human beings in magical, dreamlike and imaginary situations."[13] A fuller description of the musical is offered by Thomas Schatz, who writes:

> All genre films involve the promise of utopia... The musical genre's basic oppositions derive from a narrative distinction between the dramatic story, in which static, one-dimensional characters acknowledge their status as dynamic entertainers and perform directly to the camera/audience. This formal opposition reinforces the genre's social concerns, which center around American courtship rites and the very concept of entertainment.[14]

Thus the backgrounds or settings of musicals, be it Latin America or Alaska, have little basis in reality. You Were Never Lovelier, a 1942 film starring Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth was described by one writer as "a romantic musical with the currently fashionable Latin-American background (though it could have been anywhere)...[15] and by another as "an excursion to an imaginary Buenos Aires."[16]

As the forties wore on, the musicals became more and more sophisticated. In 1945 Yolanda and the Thief again featured Astaire, and the setting was again Latin America. He played a confidence man out to fool a wealthy girl by pretending to be this devout young woman's guardian angel in earthly form. The Pirate (1948) is an even more stylized film. The setting is a mythical Caribbean island, and Gene Kelly plays a strolling player who pretends to be a notorious pirate in order to win the love of a wealthy and protected girl, played by Judy Garland.

One can see the similarities in the two stories: actors in the movie roles of actors (since what is a con man if not an actor) pretending to be something else and the innocent and gullible Latin-

American woman once again. Both films were made by the estimable Vincente Minnelli and were somewhat too esoteric for the public, who were growing tired of the genre. In the fifties the importance of the Latin American utopia diminished in the movie musical, as realistic locations and transplanted Broadway blockbusters took over the screen.

During the thirties, forties and fifties there were several non-musicals which dealt with Latin themes: 1939's biography Juarez starring Paul Muni in the title role; Viva Zapata in 1952, another biography in which Marlon Brando sensitively portrayed the revolutionary Mexican Indian leader; 1947's Treasure of the Sierra Madre with the most repellent Mexican bandit ever seen on screen; 1949's We Were Strangers with John Garfield, political doings in Cuba; 1950's adaptations of W.H. Hudson's novel Green Mansions, starring Audrey Hepburn as Rima, the bird girl, and which one critic described as "full of plastic studio jungle, Villa Lobos music, Katerine Dunham dancers, but implacably dull..."[17]

These are just a few other films on Latin American themes, along with 1942's I Married a Zombie, which, despite its unfortunate title, is an interesting movie set on the island of Haiti, evocatively photographed in black and white. It treats voodooism in a non-sensational manner and is quite engrossing.

But all these films will have to wait for another conference and another paper.

Nola Kortner Alex

October 1986

NOTES

[1]Rubén Blades, quoted in interview, Chicago Tribune, Oct. 6, 1985.

[2]Clive Hirschhorn, The Hollywood Musical, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1981, p. 290.

[3]John Storm Roberts, The Latin Tinge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 105.

[4]Leonard Bernstein, Joy of Music (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 167.

[5]Gerald Bordman, American Operetta (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 7.

[6]Roberts, pp. 33-4.

[7]Hirschhorn, p. 55.

[8]Robert Sklar, Movie-Made America (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 215.

[9]Ibid., p. 224.

[10]Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes, Crítica de Cinema no Suplemento Literário (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Paz e Terra, 1981), pp. 381-82.

[11]David Thomson, Biographical Dictionary of Film (New York: Wm. Morrow and Company, 1976), p. 490.

[12]Ted Sennett, Hollywood Musicals (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), p. 85.

[13]Thomas Schatz, Hollywood Genres (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), p. 189.

[13]Thomson, p. 15.

[15]Hirschhorn, p. 215.

[16]Sennett, p. 186.

[17]Thomson, p. 168.